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ABSTRACT

The study assessed the oral narrative abilities of 10 normal and 10 learning-disabled (LD) middle school children (11-12 years old). Narratives were assessed using A. Applebee's system for the development of story organization. The narratives were also examined for the specific components used within the stories themselves. Findings revealed different developmental levels of narrative structure and a differentiation in the specific components within the story episodes between the groups of Ss. Findings suggested that LD Ss had difficulty formulating a well thought-out and coherent narrative, and that remediation should focus on the concepts of underlying narrative components. (CL)

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A COMPARISON OF THE ORAL NARRATIVE ABILITIES
BETWEEN NORMAL AND LEARNING-DISABLED MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

The present study assessed the oral narrative abilities of normal and learning-disabled middle school children. Narratives were assessed using Applebee's (1978) system for the development of story organization. The narratives were also examined for the specific components used within the stories themselves. Findings revealed different developmental levels of narrative structure and a differentiation in the specific components within the story episodes between the groups of subjects. These findings are discussed relative to the assessment and treatment of the learning-disabled child.

The study of language acquisition has challenged speech-language pathologists for a least two decades (Wallach, 1984). This challenge has recently taken on a new perspective; the investigation of the language abilities of the school-age child. There are several reasons why investigators have developed an interest in studying the language patterns of older children. The most prominent explanation centers around the issue of the learning-disabled child. Very recently speech-language pathologists have begun to appreciate the impact of early language disorders on other aspects of children's development as they face the challenges that are part of successful functioning within the classroom setting (Wallach and Butler, 1984). Therefore in the 1980's as a profession, we find ourselves concerned with the processing and use of language from a totally different outlook, the viewpoint of the language of instruction. In other words, a new question arises, "What language abilities must a child have to function successfully within the classroom."

The prevalence of language problems within the learning disabilities population has been well documented (Johnson and Myklebust, 1967; Berry, 1969, Kirk et al., 1968; Wiig and Semel, 1976; Benton and Pearl, 1978; Gerber and Bryan, 1981). Of all the problems experienced by children with learning disabilities, language may be the most pervasive (Wiig and Semel, 1984). The ability to use language affects all aspects of learning. For example, in the middle grades a learning disabled child's delays in the acquisition of syntactic rules and abstract linguistic concepts limits his academic achievement (Aiken, 1972; Wiig and Semel, 1974). The undeniable difficulty seems then, not the issue of the relationship between language problems and learning disabilities, but rather what methods or what intervention

techniques should be examined as a means for providing both researchers and clinicians with the most meaningful information about how children can be more successful language learners.

There are two major concerns in the assessment of school-age language that must be considered as critical in answering this question. First, a great deal of information is needed on the language abilities of normal children, especially their use of language in the classroom. Only when this data base has been established can the language patterns of the learning-disabled child be studied with any clarity and consistency. The second area of concern is the identification of those language skills that contribute the most to successful classroom performance. This approach to the study of language has been addressed by many authors (Wiig, 1984; Wiig and Semel, 1984; Van Kleeck, 1984; Menyuk, 1977). A major discovery which has resulted from previous research is the growing dissatisfaction with the adequacy of transformational grammar to describe and explain language comprehension and production. Therefore, new approaches to the study of school-age language have been emerging (Westby, 1984).

The shift from the study of syntax to the study of pragmatics or communicative functions of language in the mid-1970's led to the concept that the meaning of a total discourse is more than can be explained from the sum of the meanings in the individual words and sentences. This new concept has not only necessitated the study of more than single utterances, but also provides a more thorough and logical approach to examining the language children need to use within classroom settings. For example, most communication takes place within a discourse setting. This discourse may be in the format of a question-answer paradigm or may take the form of an explanation of a concept which could consist of several utterances.

As investigators have attempted to examine language from this discourse format the study of texts or narratives has emerged. A text has been defined to refer to any passage, spoken or written, of whatever length, that does form a unified whole (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). A text could actually be either a single sentence or a novel.

Methods of defining, analyzing and interpreting texts are developing rapidly. This paper will deal with one specific type of text, the narrative. The narrative is viewed as a fertile data base for the study of child language because children must have a variety of cognitive and linguistic skills to be able to tell or write narratives. For example, they must be able to present knowledge linguistically in the appropriate rhetorical mode, and they must possess a knowledge of causal, intentional, spatial, and role relationships (Graesser, 1981).

Narratives can take several different forms. These forms vary depending upon their function. For example, oral and written narratives would have different functions. As a result of these dissimilar functions, structural variation in their organization occurs (Westby, 1984). These organizational variations, naturally, influence the meaning of the narrative to some degree. In addition to examining narrative forms it's important to view the difference in narrative styles. The styles can be oral or literal. These styles are actually on a continuum and in the midrange of this continuum some oral forms resemble writing and some written forms are more like oral language (Tannen, 1980). For example, a speech or a lecture is indeed similar to written language, while a personal letter is more a portrayal of oral language (Westby, 1984). In summary, children's narratives can take two forms. They can be written or oral. Within the oral style the structure can vary depending on the purpose.

Since a child's narrative skills are so important, especially at the school-age level, it was decided, in the present study, to investigate the possible differences between the narratives of normal and learning-disabled children. One type of narrative was elicited--the oral narrative.

The type of analysis used in the examination of these children's narratives was taken from the work of Applebee (1978). Applebee (1978) proposed a system for studying the development of story organization. He found, that with age, children's stories grow longer and more complex. Applebee (1978) suggests six stages of narrative development. The earliest prenarrative structure is termed "heaps." In heap stories, children talk about whatever attracts their attention. As a consequence, there is no relationship or organization among the elements of individual microstructures and there is no story macrostructure. Such stories consist of labeling items or describing activities. Applebee (1978) termed the second state of prenarrative development "sequences." The term sequence may be misleading because, although there may be an apparent time sequence in the story, it is not actually planned by the storyteller. Sequence stories do portray macrostructures, however. The macrostructure involves a central character or a setting or a topic. The microstructure elements of the story may involve activities of the central character, but this relationship between microstructure and macrostructure is very concrete.

The next conceptual level of stories is termed "primitive narratives." Like sequences, primitive narratives have a macrostructure that consists of a person, object, or event that forms a concrete center. A primitive narrative story puts together characters, objects or events that are perceptually associated with each other in some way. The elements of the story follow logically from the attributes of the center. This narrative schema represents the child's first use of inference in stories.

The next developmental state toward the true narrative structure is the "unfocused chain." In unfocused chain stories the individual elements or events are linked together in logical or cause-effect relationships, often through the use of conjunctive cohesive techniques. This stage of narrative development rarely lasts for a long period of time and children rapidly move toward the narrative structure of the "focused chain" (Westby, 1984).

Children's focused chain narratives resemble adult stories in surface appearance because they consist of a central character with a true sequence of events. The understanding of attributes of characters which began to appear in primitive narratives is still weak, however. In the focused chain stories, an ending may follow for the preceding event, but the listener may not be able to decipher from the ending how the story began (Westby, 1982).

True narratives, the last developmental stage identified by Applebee (1978) are normally used by children once they reach the age of five or six. At this time they reach the stage of conceptual thought that enables them to formulate a true narrative that has the components of a story grammar (Botvin and Sutton-Smith, 1977; Applebee, 1978). True narratives integrate chaining of events with the complementary centering of the primitive narrative. Therefore, they have well developed plots. The ending of the story is related in some way to issues presented in the beginning of the story (Westby, 1984).

Once the developmental level of the story was identified an analysis of the macrostructure (story theme) components was completed. The analysis used in this study was taken from the work of Stein and Glenn (1979). Stein and Glen (1979) were interested in what they referred to

as "macrostructure analysis of narrative texts" in order to understand how they are comprehended and remembered. Sometimes these schemas or macrostructure analyses are called story grammars. All story grammars included a setting and a goal which is met in an episode system. The setting introduces the main character and/or describes the social, physical or temporal context of the story. All components other than the setting become episodes. Most stories have two or more episodes. Episodes have a beginning which is an initiating event, a reaction of the characters to the initiating event, an action of attempt by the characters to deal with the initiating event, an outcome or consequence of the attempt, and an ending (Westby, 1984). Most children, when developing normally, are able to tell true narratives with two or more episodes before entering the first grade.

Method

Subjects

Twenty children served as subjects. All youngsters were between the ages of 11 years, 10 months and 12 years, 8 months. Ten children were considered to be learning-disabled and attended full-time a special class for learning-disabled children. The remaining ten children were considered by their teacher to be functioning normally within the sixth grade. All children were males and had passed a hearing screening administered by the examiner.

Procedure

All testing was conducted in a 6' x 8' room with a one-way mirror. The child and examiner were seated side-by-side in front of a small table. A narrative was obtained from each subject in the following manner. Each child was asked to tell a story about the plot of his favorite movie or

television program. If the child was unable or unwilling to do this, he was encouraged to discuss a topic of his choice. All narratives were audio-taped using a Superscope C-200cp portable two-speed cassette recorder. Each narrative was then transcribed orthographically from the audiotape.

Measurement and Analysis

The developmental level of each narrative was then determined. Narratives were categorized as 1) heaps, 2) sequences, 3) primitive narratives, 4) unfocused chains, 5) focused chains or 6) true narratives. In addition, narratives were analyzed in terms of the components of a story grammar. The following questions were formulated to assist in this examination:

1. Does the narrative have a setting?
2. What components of an episode does the narrative contain?

Reliability

To ascertain the reliability of the narrative analysis, one judge, a certified speech-language pathologist familiar with the procedure analyzed 20% of all the narrative samples. Interscorer agreement was calculated using a point-by-point percentage of agreement procedure. The interscorer agreement for the developmental level of the narratives was 88.1%.

Results

Results were analyzed descriptively in two ways: 1) the developmental level of the narratives and 2) the components within the narratives. Table 1 summarizes the developmental level of the narrative itself for each subject within both groups.

(Insert Table 1 about here)

The majority of the normal children produced either focused chains or true narratives. Eight of the ten narratives from the normal subjects were these

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types of stories. In contrast, the learning-disabled subjects recited, generally, sequence stories or primitive narratives. Eight of the ten narratives for this group fell into those categories.

The next analysis, an examination of the components within the narratives resulted in the following information. The first question, "Does the narrative have a setting?" provided an interesting finding. Nine of the ten normal subjects began their story with a setting statement. Four of the learning-disabled children, which is less than half of the subjects in that group, used setting statements.

The second question, "What components of an episode does the narrative contain?" also yielded differences in the performances of the two groups of children. Before this issue can be addressed, however, it is important to state here that narratives were not examined for story episodes or episode components unless they were primitive text structures.

The rationale for this lies in the fact that a sequence story is descriptive in nature even though there is a macrostructure which revolves around a central theme or character. The primitive narratives are the first narrative stage where some episode components become evident. All subjects in both groups examined who related a narrative at the primitive level or better offered an initiating event. However, a disparity emerged between the groups in the use of two components: 1) the reaction of the characters to the initiating event and 2) the ending. The learning-disabled children exhibited a mean score of .08 in the inclusion of reaction statements within their narratives as compared to a mean 1.38 for the normal subjects. In other words, the learning-disabled child rarely used reaction statements and the normal child included at least one reaction statement for each episode.

The ending component of the episodes also yielded an interesting difference. The learning-disabled group of children, in many instances, would simply say, "that's all" or "the end" without any resolution of the initiating event. This style of ending the story existed in four of the narratives examined. The trend found within the stories of the normal subjects was to not only provide an ending, but in the majority of the stories the ending was, in fact, related to the issues introduced in the initiating event.

Discussion

In summary, there seem to be two main differences between normal and learning-disabled sixth grade males when they were asked to tell a story. These differences were that 1) different developmental levels of the narrative structure itself were found between the groups of children and 2) there was a differentiation in the specific components within the story episodes used by each group of subjects.

These differences between the performances of the two groups of children may be an indication that youngsters with learning disabilities, at least in terms of the children examined in this investigation, may not be able to organize the sentences they used in a systematic coherent manner, which is an instrumental skill if the listener is to understand the story. Anderson (1977) refers to this difficulty as a lack of planning skills on the part of the child.

The inability or inefficiency in organizing and planning logical sequences of thought within a story format is supported further when the components themselves within the narratives were examined. For example, there were distinctive differences in the segments of component structures used by the groups of children. Recall that only four of the learning-disabled

children began their narrative with a setting whereas all but one of the normal children initiated their story with a setting statement.

The setting statement is critical in a narrative if the reader is to understand the thrust of the story because it serves to introduce the main character and provide a physical description about the plot. If this information is not presented or unclear to the listener, then comprehension difficulties already result.

These differences found between the normal and learning-disabled subjects support the premise that the children with learning disabilities, who were subjects in this investigation, had difficulty in formulating a well thought out and coherent narrative. Remediation programs, then, should take this finding into consideration when planning treatment targets.

Before treatment can be discussed at length for the child with a narrative disability, however, it is important to realize that the collection of more data is necessary before it can be fully understood why, for some children, telling stories remains a very difficult task. Nonetheless, Westby (1984) provides several points for consideration that she asserts would be helpful in guiding the professional in treating children with narrative disabilities. She states that, in spite of our means to analyze the components of a text or story, these components cannot be taught in isolation and result in a child's improved comprehension and production of narratives. It seems more fruitful to provide these children with an understanding of the concepts that underlie these components. For example, the professional could emphasize the following: 1) teaching the child the effects of the environment on people and the reciprocal of that; 2) instructing the child on the effects of the environment on events and 3) demonstrating the effects of feelings on events and events on feelings

(Westby and Martinez, 1981). From this type of comprehension a child should have a better understanding of all those factors that aid in providing a logical coherent story.

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Table 1. Developmental Levels of Narratives for Normal and Learning-Disabled Children

	Group:	Normal Subjects	Learning-Disabled Subjects
Heaps		0	1
Sequences		1	4
Primitive Narratives		1	4
Unfocused Chains		0	0
Focused Chains		3	1
True Narratives		5	0